Open Source Analysis of Africa by the Masses: Professional Analysts Can Gain Insights by Reviewing Internet Article Comments

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<u>Introduction</u>

Open source analysis involves the collection of material from publicly available domains such as newspapers, dissertations, and radio broadcasts. Professional analysts then use this information to produce actionable intelligence. Unfortunately some of these analysts might be overlooking and thus not incorporating into their products insightful and informative comments made by various individuals at the end of internet news articles.

The internet articles professional analysts utilize in their work are generally either recently posted on the internet or archived in databases. As archived internet articles often don't include comment sections, where just about anyone with access to the internet can post additional information and/or their opinions, analysts don't have ready access to these sometimes useful commentaries from the public. This lack of not bothering to archive comments probably reflects the likelihood that even when comments are available, such as with a newly published internet article, they are not routinely reviewed by professional analysts of the open source community.

The purpose of this paper is to emphasize how helpful these comments can be for professional analysts and to encourage remedying their underutilization. The implication is not that these comments should be a sole source but rather serve as one of many sources professional analysts use when crafting their reports. It is also not being implied that the comments do not come without issues, such as bias, which can degrade their usefulness. However, most sources have bias and a skillful analyst can often mitigate its impact on a final product.

Two sets of comments will be discussed. One will be called "American comments" reflecting the fact they are posted on websites such as the American version of the web portal Yahoo where articles from the Associated Press, Reuters, and other news organizations may be found. It does not mean all of the comments are from American citizens, though from the context the majority

seems to be American and to a smaller extent foreign nationals living in the United States. In the same vein, "African comments" refers to postings on African websites, though from the context of these comments nearly all seem to have originated from Africans.

By looking not just at the content of the comments but also the similarities and differences of the African and American comments, professional analysts are provided an immense trove of additional valuable information. By making these comments available to analysts and having them routinely review them, final products will likely be improved and new avenues identified for pursuing additional research.

For the sake of simplicity this article has been limited to American and African comments. However, there are undoubtedly advantages to looking at comments from other regions, such as Asian comments regarding articles about Europe. In such an interconnected world it would be a mistake not to consider the views of geographically and culturally diverse populations for almost any international issues and frequently many domestic ones as well.

How Comments Can Assist Analysts

As with many other sources utilized by analysts, comments may have problems, such as bias, which can potentially diminish their utility. However, despite some of these limitations, which are discussed in other sections of this article, these comments can still provide valuable information and assistance to the analyst. Some areas where they have done so, at least for this analyst, include explaining and/or describing:

1) Cultural nuances in such factors as why a particular venue was chosen for an announcement.
2) The role of non-governing ethnic groups.

3) Friction points among various groups.

4) Why a government official said something as opposed to the article just stating what was said.

5) Past histories that may not be widely known.

6) Underlying relationships of government departments, such as an agency being run by a minister's nephew.

7) References to additional articles on certain topics.

8) Suspected actions, both overt and covert, by foreign powers to influence the situation.

9) Religious references, such as why certain Koranic verses were recited.

10) Possible future outcomes from the actions mentioned in the article.

The comments on the African articles are frequently by individuals living, or who have lived, in the particular country being described. These people can thus serve to an extent as the eyes and ears for a civilian analyst stationed in DC or a military analyst in Europe, where AFRICOM is presently located. They are attuned to the daily rhythms of life in their country, and if something upsets these rhythms, even slightly, they may make a note of it by writing a comment. Perhaps most useful to the analyst is that these comments often put articles into the perspective of the common person. Thus, an article about pending increases in grain prices in an African country which will occur unless the international community provides more donor aid might also mention that the price of bread will increase, causing hardship for the populace. However, someone in that country might post a comment describing in more detail how difficult that price increase will be to bear, especially when coupled with other recent price hikes the article did not mention, and that perhaps the government is not willing to confront the large grain producers because bribes are being paid.

Looking at the American comments on a similar article might provide a different perspective. Americans might mention the need not to intervene with money or grain as corrupt officials will siphon off huge amounts, that we risk creating dependency, and that we can no longer afford such largesse. Comparing the American and African comments shows the analyst the large rift in thinking between the two peoples.

Racism, Anti-Muslim Sentiment, and Isolationism

There are, unfortunately, numerous cases of racism among the comments in the American postings. Much of it is blatant, with Africans frequently referred to as monkeys. Some, however, is not so obvious, making it difficult to discern the underlying reason for the posting. Whether blatant or subtle racism it would be a mistake for an analyst to disregard these comments. Their prevalence shows hatred against Blacks by a portion of the American population. How large a portion, as well as their demographics, is unknown. However, these comments are a grim reminder that the real world includes people from all walks of life with all sorts of opinions, and that if policy makers wish to implement change they may find themselves trying to garner votes among some people who hold a particularly unsavory view of Blacks in general and African Blacks in particular.

Along with racism there are also a large number of anti-Muslim comments. The phrase "religion of peace" is frequently used in a sarcastic manner. Anti-Muslim however does not always translate into wishing to attack. Indeed much of the conversation is in the mode of isolationism with no desire to get involved with Muslims at all.

Some of the isolationism is tinged with racism, but much of it is based on the premise that America should not get involved with that continent because (a) corruption is rampant and (b)

conflicts appear to be the way of life. Corruption is discussed elsewhere in this article, but with regards to the second reason, ongoing conflicts, there is a sense from the comments that intervention would be futile as fighting would just resume when Americans leave or break out someplace else if we stayed. Basically these comments are reflecting frustration with the results of past actions by the US in Africa and the desire not to waste money or the blood of American soldiers on the continent.

Like racism, it is not possible to tell the portion of the population that holds isolationist views based on comments on internet articles. However, the preponderance of the "don't get involved" comments, which far outnumber the racist ones, is perhaps an important indication of what the American population will and will not tolerate. The conflict in Darfur is an excellent example. Some comments advocated American involvement but many stridently opposed it.

Racism, anti-Muslim sentiment, and isolationism are common American comments. An analyst would do well to review these in order to sense the mood of at least part, a very vocal and sometimes angry part, of the American populace.

Comparison between US and African Postings

Several differences exist between comment postings in the American and African press, including:

1) Fewer comments in the African press in regards to the same topic covered by the American press. Besides the reasons listed in the section on bias, such as lack of internet access and fear of retaliation, another reason might exist for the fewer postings, apathy born from frustration. Why bother making comments when the long term ruling party, which has never paid any attention to the will of the people in the past, will certainly

remain in power no matter what is said? Additionally, with the day to day struggle being so difficult in many parts of Africa, perhaps many of the people, even if they have access to internet services, don't have the luxury of time to post comments.

2) A general absence of advertisements, spam, and other clutter in the African press comments. Many American comments tend to be sarcastic and/or extraneous with the posting serving as a sounding board for the writer's views even if they have nothing to do with the topic at hand. The numerous unrelated comments force the analyst to sift through chaff to find the wheat.

3) Significantly fewer racist and anti-Muslim remarks in the African press comments.

4) Differences in phrasing, such as freedom fighters for terrorists when describing certain groups.

5) Differences in perception as to the role of the United States. Many African comments expect and want a more active interventionist policy, feelings not reflected by the American postings.

Though there are numerous differences, there are also similarities, perhaps the most interesting being how frequently corruption is discussed by both of them. Obviously its permeation throughout many African societies has struck a nerve on both sides of the Atlantic, and it's a major issue raised even when the article under review isn't directly discussing economic topics. There is, however, a different flavor to the corruption discussions. While the majority of American postings express the view that corruption is so entrenched in Africa aid money should no longer be sent, the African comments, while still bemoaning corruption, feel the money, rather than being completely cutoff, should continue to flow with better oversight.

An interesting corollary to this is that American comments often look at aid not only as wasteful but frequently counterproductive, in other words the cause of many of Africa's problems, while many African comments, while acknowledging aid has led to corruption, still regard it as part of the solution. Problem or solution, the comments from the two sides shed much light on the cultural and philosophical differences across the divide.

Possible Sources of Bias and Error

As previously mentioned, similar to other sources analysts use, comment sections are susceptible to bias, including that caused by not having true cross-sections of populations writing the comments. Additionally factual errors may occur. There are several possible sources of these problems:

1) Comment writing by an organization or government agency. As an example, perhaps an African government organization charged with encouraging tourism and investment dutifully provides numerous comments which might deemphasize negative aspects of a story and accentuate positive ones. Although this possibility can not be discounted, most of the comments, which cover a wide range of viewpoints, seem to be unscripted spontaneous reactions from various individuals as opposed to a writing campaign.

2) American comments are not from a true representative cross-section of the American population. This seems quite likely. In comparison to the American population at large there appears to be a disproportionate number of isolationists, foreign nationals living in the states, and racists who comment on the articles. This is not to say that other voices aren't heard, but that some groups of voices are more prevalent than others.

3) Filtering by the content provider. This is to remove gibberish and spam but might inadvertently also remove important content.

4) Comments may be based on misleading information or conjecture. It could also be individuals and /or groups are trying to foment ethnic discord by painting negative pictures of another group. However, it's still important for the analyst to read what others are reading, for the dissemination of information, even when it's incorrect (and perhaps especially when it's incorrect), can result in significant consequences.

5) Fear of posting by Africans in Africa. Some people may not be willing to share their true sentiments for fear of possible retaliation by extremists or government forces. This might be especially true in countries with limited internet access where in order to comment the person has to go to an internet café, making anonymity of what is written on computers far from certain. Additionally, many websites require the individual to register before allowing them to post, further stripping their anonymity.

6) Language barriers. As some commenters write in a non-native language such as English, unintended biased phrasing caused by a limited vocabulary might occur.

7) Postings are only from those who own or have access to computers or other electronic devices capable of delivering an electronic message to websites. This eliminates large portions of populations in Africa from being able to comment.

8) Cultural barriers. Since the computer is a relatively new item in many parts of Africa, it might be reasonable to assume that many are not yet entirely familiar or comfortable with its capabilities, including posting comments. One must remember that much of Africa has a traditional oral culture where stories and information are passed by word-of-mouth and not in writings.

The fact that bias is present does not totally eliminate the usefulness of the comments. There is a good chance that bias was present in the article the commenters were critiquing, yet an analyst would probably not totally disregard the article. He or she would instead critically critique the article and then formulate a review, incorporating information from other sources as well as professional judgment, which both acknowledges the bias and tries to mitigate its impact. Reviewing comments requires the same careful approach.

Saving the Comments

For analysts to utilize comments on internet articles archived in databases, the databases need to start saving the comment sections. Articles are generally saved in databases in one of two ways, automatically via a computer program which searches the web for keywords, or manually by having an individual look for appropriate articles and then capturing them. Unless time is of the essence, waiting even several hours before entering an article would enable comments to also be captured as these are usually posted fairly quickly. Thus, setting the computer program to automatically delay entry for a set period of time, perhaps 6 hours, or asking the person who manually enters them to do the same, would result in the opportunity to incorporate valuable comments. For work of a more urgent nature which requires an article to be immediately captured, it might be possible to do the procedure twice, thus returning several hours later to capture comments originally missed during the first round.

Additionally, databases should save the URL of the internet article so an analyst can attempt to visit the site to see if there are comments posted. Unfortunately internet articles are sometimes present for only a relatively fleeting time so clicking on the URL might reveal a dead link. That is why it's important to have saved at least some of the comments in the database.

Blogs Versus Comments

   While some may compare the comments on internet news articles to those of blogs where individuals can also comment there are several key differences. First, the internet article which serves as the basis for comments is in a more noticeable public medium than if placed in an individual's blog. Although the author has no proof other than a small nonscientific sampling of individuals, it appears likely that more people open their browser to a web portal such as Yahoo, where various news articles are prominently displayed, than to a particular blog. Second, many blogs have a known political leaning and/or preface posted articles with commentary intended to sway the reader's opinion. This bias at the blog can create bias among the commentators reflecting on articles posted at the blog. Finally, the posting of articles at blogs is not always as timely as their appearance on a web portal. The webmaster for the blog must review an article first and then decide whether or not to post it, a process, depending on the individual webmaster, that can be fairly swift or fairly prolonged. Thus, blogs may not always have the most recent articles upon which to comment. This is not to say blogs are not valuable tools for the analyst. They can be quite useful. However, they do not substitute for the comments on articles at places such as Yahoo. A good analyst will utilize both blogs and article comments, as well as other sources of information, when drafting reports.

Conclusion

   From relative obscurity and anonymity people are commenting on internet articles they find important and/or interesting. For the most part there seem to be few if any significant filters screening their comments. This is what the people are saying, or at least a portion of them are

saying, and analysts who don't review these comments risk forming incomplete pictures of various stories.

To an extent analysis of open source materials struggles for acceptance within the intelligence community; having that analysis done by "regular people" as opposed to "non-professionals" might not further its cause. But to miss that analysis is to miss the opportunity to attain deeper insights regarding the subject matter at hand. It's not state of the art computers running complicated algorithms analyzing information obtained from a glitzy high tech satellite, it's people, many of whom are or were living in the actual geographic areas being studied, providing insights not always readily discernible to the analyst sitting in a cubicle far from the sites of interest. Though the journalist whose article is being reviewed is supposed to provide much of the onsite information gathering, and indeed many journalists do an outstanding job, the people who comment often provide not just additional important facts but also a certain "cultural flavor" which helps put the entire story into perspective.

There is a risk that some analysts might feel because the people making comments do not have the same degree of training as they do that such commoners' comments are not sophisticated or insightful. Just as there might be arrogance in believing only trained journalists can provide the entire story, or at least the parts of stories worth analyzing, there might be elitism in believing the people's comments are not worth viewing and that only a trained analyst can really appropriately comment on articles. However, as many will testify who have lived in poor communities, education is not a prerequisite for making sophisticated analyses. In some ways the lack of a formal education, especially if the substitute is a wealth of experience, can be an advantage.

This is not to say that those who write comments are uneducated. Indeed many of the comments appear to have been written by people who probably attended universities. However, their actual degree of education is difficult to ascertain, and despite the number of years in school they may or may not have under their belts, the comments are often quite intelligent, thoughtful, and helpful to the work of the analyst.

It is not that the masses writing comments are doing the work of professional analysts. Rather, they are providing additional information and insights with which the professional analysts can formulate their own products. The comment sections of the internet have provided the people with a voice; it's to the analysts' advantage to listen.

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